

THE OLD COVENANT EXODUS 24

INTRODUCTION:

I want us to look at our Bibles for a moment to see how they are put together. The Bible that I hold in my hand is divided into two sections. The first section is called the "Old Testament," and the second part is called "the New Testament." Our English word testament is a synonym for the word "covenant." We could properly see our Bibles divided into two sections — the Old Covenant and the New Covenant.

When we see the first part of the Scriptures as embodying the Old Covenant, we look to the passage that is before us tonight to see the Old Covenant established. Actually, there are several instances of God making covenants in the Old Testament -- with Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David. But the dominant covenant in the Old Testament is the one that God gave at Mt. Sinai. We have an eyewitness record of the beginning of that covenant in these words from Exodus. To get the full picture we need to pull together the things that happened before the golden calf incident and the things that followed. The establishment of their covenant was interrupted by that transgression on the part of the people.

So that we might be able to rightly divide the Scriptures, and understand how to use the Scriptures, it is critical that we understand the nature of the old covenant. So, even though there is possibly not a Jewish person in this congregation tonight, we are going to look at

one of the most important moments to ever take place in all of Jewish history. If you were a Jewish person, you would look back to this moment at Mt. Sinai as the time when your nation had its beginning. In order to help us put the old covenant into context, there are some things we need to understand about it.

I. THE OLD COVENANT WAS ESTABLISHED BY DIVINE INITIATIVE.

This can be said of all of the Covenants in the Old Testament. There is not a covenant recorded that began with man. Each covenant began when the sovereign and eternal God approached men and lay before them the terms of a covenant

1. A gift of grace

Since it was established by a divine initiative, it is obviously a gift of grace. For holy God to approach about two million former slaves as they stood under the shadow of Mt. Sinai and to say to them, "I'm going to enter in to an agreement with you, form a contract between us," it had to be an act of grace. There was nothing in Israel that qualified them to have this special relationship with God. It was the eternal God acting out of His own sovereign rights as an expression of His grace.

It is well that we remember all of the covenants that are ultimately rooted in the grace of God.

2. A nation born.

If you have to choose a point in Hebrew history where the nation was born, there is agreement among Biblical scholars that you choose this moment at Mt. Sinai. The nation of Israel is unique at this point. Their statehood as a nation was not the idea of Moses. It was not the result of some new political insight about a people that could be formed into a nation. It was not the result of some political activist. The birth of the nation took place when God entered into a covenant relationship with these former slaves at Mt. Sinai. This bound them together in such a way that they would from that day forward be a nation under God.

Even though we will not explore it tonight, it is well to remember that another nation came out of the New Covenant. Those who are participants in the New Covenant become a "holy nation" according to Simon Peter.

So, we began by laying down this first truth that it is God who took the initiative in establishing the Covenant.

II. THE OLD COVENANT WAS CONDITIONAL.

This is the most obvious thing about the Old Covenant. God very carefully laid down the conditions under which Israel would benefit from this arrangement with Him. When He first set forth the idea with Moses at Mt. Sinai, He said; "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried on eagle's wings and brought you to myself, now if you obey me fully and keep my Covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests

and a holy nation. These are the words that you are to speak to the Israelites" (Exodus 19:4-6). So God laid a condition on it from the beginning — "Now if you obey me fully and keep my Covenant."

1. The Book of the Covenant set forth the conditions.

In the inspired record of this covenant, Moses makes reference to the Book of the Covenant. "Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, 'We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey.'" Exactly what was in the Book of the Covenant is somewhat uncertain. It contained at least the Ten Commandments that He had given to Moses on the mountain. It may well have included everything that has found in chapters 20, 21, 22, and 23 in this book of Exodus. These things found in the Book of the Covenant — including the Ten Commandments — were the conditions of the Covenant. God would be their God and bless them in special ways if they met these conditions.

2. The blessings were dependent on meeting the conditions.

Everything in this Covenant was conditional. You will find an extended section in the Book of Deuteronomy, which is an exposition of this old covenant, where the blessings and the curses are listed side by side. Whether you lived under the blessing of God or the curse of God was determined by how well you met the conditions of the Covenant. If you lived up to the conditions of the Covenant, then you were blessed. If you disobeyed the terms of the Covenant, then you were cursed. This is a primary thing to remember about

the Old Covenant — the blessings of the Covenant were conditional. The people must obey everything the Lord God had written in the book of the Covenant.

III. THE OLD COVENANT WAS EXCLUSIVE.

When God renewed the Covenant with sinful Israel there at Mt. Sinai, He turned to this part of the Covenant immediately. He said, "I'm making a covenant with you. Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world. The people who live among you will see how awesome is the work that I, the Lord, will do for you. Obey what I command you today. —Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land where you are going, or there will be a snare among you. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and cut down their asherah poles. Do not worship any other God, for the Lord, whose name is jealous, is a jealous God. Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land." Israel was to understand that when they made this covenant with God it was an exclusive covenant.

1. It excluded all other gods.

They could not be in covenant with the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and be in covenant with another god. The terms of the Covenant were, "If you enter into this covenant with me, you break all ties to all other deities. I will be your God exclusively."

They understood this, though they had difficulty living with it.

Just how much difficulty they had is obvious—before the Covenant had even been ratified, they had already made themselves another god. They had incurred the judgment of the God of the Covenant before they could really get the Covenant implemented.

2. It made the relationship with God the governing principle of life.

Just how widely this Covenant principle was to govern their lives is obvious from what God said to them. They are to relate to the people who live in the land in light of the fact they are in Covenant with God. They are to relate to the nations around them in light of the fact that they are in covenant with God. They are to relate to each other in light of the fact that they are in covenant with God. Their covenant with God is an exclusive covenant that binds them to Him and to His standards of conduct. It will allow no other time or consideration.

This is an important element in the Old Covenant that needs to be clearly understood. Of course, this element is also in the New Covenant. You cannot be in covenant with God and in covenant with some idol at the same time. He is a jealous God. The exclusive nature of the covenant is like the exclusive nature of the covenant of marriage. The marriage covenant excludes all other husbands and wives. The covenant with God is exclusive in the same manner. The marriage covenant regulates your relationships to other persons of the opposite sex. You are not free to go looking for other partners—your wife is a jealous wife!

IV. THE OLD COVENANT WAS THE BASIS FOR COMMUNION.

It would probably be more correct to say that the covenant itself was the basis of communion with God. When the covenant was finally ratified, there was a time of feast in the presence of the Lord. Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the 70 elders of Israel went up and enjoyed a revelation of God Himself. It is reported, "But God did not raise His hand against these leaders of Israelites; they saw God and they ate and drank"

1. Communion with God.

The primary emphasis in this incident is that on the bases of the covenant He has established with them, they are able to commune with Him, to enjoy a feast with him. We could wish that the description of this incident was more fully described, but we will have to content with what Moses left. We know who was there—the representatives of Israel and God—and we know what they did, "they ate and drank."

Does this remind us of a meal that is associated with the New Covenant that we call "communion" or the "Lord's Supper?" It should. The Lord's Supper is celebrated in a much simpler setting, but it is a reminder to us that the basis of our communion with God is a covenant.

2. Union with each other.

Even though without a doubt the emphasis is upon their communion with God, there is a element in which the nation is drawn into union with each other by their covenant with God. The thing that will bind them together is that they share in a Covenant with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In the reality of this covenant, they see each other in a new

light. At least they should have! Before they had been bound together as the sons of Abraham, but now they are bound together as the people of covenant with God.

V. THE OLD COVENANT WAS PREPARATORY.

This is the most important thing that I will say tonight. We do not go back to Exodus 24 and 34 for a final word. As Christians, we go not to Mt. Sinai, but to Mt. Calvary. We see everything that happened at Mt. Sinai as being preparatory for what happened in Jesus Christ. It is this temporary or preparatory element that we give emphasis to.

1. It prepared for the new covenant by revealing righteousness.

One of the basic purposes of the law was to reveal the righteous character of God. God revealed His character in that which He made the conditions of the Old Covenant. Where would man ever discover God's standard of righteousness if God did not reveal it? How does God go about revealing His standard of righteousness? God revealed that standard of righteousness in the Old Covenant. A basic purpose of the law was to cultivate in human kind a deep sense of what was right and what was wrong.

2. It prepared for the New Covenant by revealing sin.

This goes deeper than just identifying what is sin. The law revealed sinfulness.

C. S. Lewis made the comment that all you have to do to discover how sinful you really are is to try to reform yourself or to make yourself a better person. Have you tried that recently? Why is it I have such difficulty in developing in my life habits of goodness and righteousness? You do not have to teach your children to sin—it will come naturally. All

you need to do to discover the sinfulness of your children is to establish some family rules. These rules may be good and reasonable, but your children will break those rules. This is the thing that the Old Covenant revealed so clearly — there is none righteous no not one. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul in the Roman and Galatians letters goes in to some detail in relating the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. The writer of Hebrews does the same thing to demonstrate the superiority of the New Covenant. In both sections of Scripture the Old Covenant is set forth as being preparatory for the new. The new is the fulfillment of the old. In one place, Paul calls the old a shadow and the new the substance.

Does that mean then that I have no regard for the Old Covenant? No, I look to the Old Covenant to see a God who establishes covenant with sinful human beings. I look to the Old Covenant to see a God who has the right to set conditions upon man. I look to the Old Covenant to see a God who demands an exclusive place and an exclusive relationship in life. I look to the Old Covenant to see a God who desires to have communion with man. I look to the Old Covenant and I look with gratitude. It is only when I see the new against the background of the old that I most deeply appreciate the New Covenant that God has given us in Christ. Thank God that there are two sections to our Bibles. If it were all just Mt. Sinai, I, as a sinful Gentile, would be without hope. Thanks be to God! There is also Mt. Calvary where the blood of an atoning sacrifice was

offered to remove the sins that the Old Covenant had revealed. I stand tonight in the saving influence of Mt. Calvary with gratitude.